

Psychoanalysis and film: an exchange

In JUMP CUT 4 Julia Lesage critiqued the way some Freudian concepts were used in the special Brecht issue of *Screen* (15:2, Summer 1974). Lesage's article, "[The Human Subject—You, He, or Me? \(Or, the Case of the Missing Penis\)](#)," was reprinted in the Summer 1975 issue of *Screen*, on psychoanalysis and cinema, followed by a "Comment" from the authors of the articles Lesage criticized: Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath, and Cohn MacCabe. We are pleased to extend the discussion by reprinting the "[Comment.](#)" It is followed by Chuck Kleinhans' response to Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe. —eds.

A ventriloquist psychoanalysis

by Chuck Kleinhans

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"By displacements and sublimations of various kinds, fixation upon one of the prototypical oral modes may develop into a whole network of interests, attitudes, and behaviors ... Repressed oral wishes may appear in disguised form. A person may become interested in linguistics, collect bottles, or learn ventriloquism."

—Calvin Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology*

Because it has provided valuable translations of European articles, advanced new topics in film discussion, and raised the level of Anglo-American film theory substantially, *Screen* is the most important British film publication. Because it is very influential in developing a new film criticism, when *Screen* begins to promote psychoanalysis as a new critical tool, the topic demands attention.

Of course there is considerable diversity among the critics associated with *Screen*. In the Summer 1975 issue, the editorial notes that *Screen's* editorial board is not unified in approving of all the articles. At the same time, given internal diversity, there can be no question that "the *Screen*

group” exists. *Screen* has been a rallying point for younger British critics interested in semiology and Marxism and consecutive issues show a continuity of interest and intent. The aim of *Screen*’s most recent work was clearly stated in their editorial in the Spring 1974 issue. They are attempting to answer the most debated and central question of radical and Marxist film theory at present—the question of ideology and film. Their interest in psychoanalysis grows out of an attempt to deal with the nature of ideology.

THE NORTH ATLANTIC CONNECTION

“If you get into trouble with an American who is an intellectual, one question you ask him: who is your psychoanalyst? He will be very embarrassed, or he will tell you straightaway, and you and he are friends.” —C.L.R. James, *Modern Politics: Lectures at the Trinidad Public Library*

Different national situations partially shape any film discussion between the English and Americans. Because the differences give a context, it’s useful to point them out, even though this understanding may have nothing to do with deciding on the validity of various positions.

Most importantly, there is a distinct difference between the U.S. and English approaches to the question of ideology and how it functions in culture. The U.S. critique of the dominant culture and its ideology has been principally raised by the opposition political groups which have emerged in the last 15 years: the movements of black and other racial/national minorities, women, gay men and lesbians, students, and the counterculture. Additionally, the anti-imperialist movement and the U.S. left have contributed to the critique, which has been tied to practical activity. Theoretical understanding of ideology has been underdeveloped: Marcuse’s pessimistic *One-Dimensional Man* is probably the only widely read work on ideology, though in recent years other left perspective have been introduced (Gramsci, Althusser, etc.).

In contrast, theory predominates in the development of a radical British film criticism. Attempting to go beyond an established liberal and left-liberal position on culture, *Screen* has been oriented to recent French theory: the left film magazines *Cahiers du cinema*, and *Cinéthique*, Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (Ben Brewster, the current editor of *Screen*, has translated Althusser), and non-Marxists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, etc.. English radical cultural thought tends to critique ideology in explicitly class terms with a strong theoretical underpinning.

The British and Americans differ substantially with regard to left political work in institutions. The English accept working within the British Film Institute and the Society for Education in Film and

Television (the publisher of *Screen*), in an effort to move them left. And, in fact, they have succeeded in doing so. In contrast, it's hard to imagine an U.S. leftist thinking seriously of working in the American Film Institute, the University Film Association, or *Film Quarterly* and expecting to move them significantly leftward.

In very general terms then, in developing a radical film criticism, the British tend to work within established institutions, have a deeper theoretical foundation and pay more attention to class and Marxist interpretation than the Americans, who tend to work with alternative institutions (*Cineaste*, *Women and Film*, *JUMP CUT*), and have closer ties to active political practice, and a broader view of factors such as sexism and racism which mediate the class nature of ideology.

Freud's very different reception in England and the United States adds another factor producing a difference in the discussion of film, ideology and psychoanalysis. As Julia Lesage pointed out in her critique of *Screen*, the U.S. reception of Freudian concepts has been pervasive, filtered through a massive critique, and heavily revised. The very recent introduction of serious Freud study in England seems strange to Americans, but the impact Freud is having in intellectual circles must be massive. Here in the United States, where psychology is a growth industry, where one of the most successful mass circulation middlebrow magazines is called *Psychology Today*, where a new laundry detergent is named "Ego," it is strange to find, for example, the word and concept "neurotic" is not in common British usage: someone is described as "terribly shy" or "very nervous." Thus a good deal of English Freudian thought must be taken in the context of its newness. Given decades of ignorance, it is easier to see how British intellectuals can uncritically accept Jacques Lacan's recasting of Freud in a Hegelian mold. Certainly refinements will have to be forthcoming.

THEORY: UNCONSCIOUS AND UNSELF-CONSCIOUS

"I'll letcha be in my dream
If I can be in yours."
—Bob Dylan

In the Summer 75 *Screen*, editorial board member Christine Gledhill reviews Peter Harcourt's book *Six European Directors* and begins by remarking about

.." *Screen's* contention that theoretical, critical and educational practices are virtually linked—that each produces and is reproduced by the others with crucial consequences for the ensuing film culture. These connections have for a long time been more a matter of conviction and assertion than of concrete analysis, but SEFT has produced *screen* in the belief that an intervention on the

theoretical front was vital for the growth of a film culture in Britain.”

This is a fair statement of *Screen*’s intention and activity. But it sounds a bit odd to U.S. ears. There is no mention of filmmaking—commercial or independent or radical—and no mention of film distribution, exhibition, or attendance. (There is radical filmmaking and distribution-exhibition in England, but this apparently lies out of *Screen*’s realm, by choice.) Gledhill offers no political reason for the intervention on the level of theory. Actually there is a material basis for this choice, which is that a fair number of *Screen* theorists do not have substantial teaching experience; therefore, it’s quite logical that they could “intervene” in the area of theory more easily than in the area of education.

Gledhill proceeds with a very negative critique of Harcourt’s book, which also extends to Harcourt as a teacher. In part, Gledhill attacks Harcourt as representing a species of empiricism—relying on film as “experience” and on the “personal response” to film. Unfortunately, Gledhill is so anti-empiricist that her argument comes down to nearly libeling Harcourt as a repressive teacher—something that could only really be determined by (empirically) observing him teach and seeing the results of his teaching on students. This is a small example of *Screen*’s materialistically correct anti-empiricism falling into the trap of idealism because it postulates “theory” as an autonomous “practice,” and “knowledge” as something apart from the material world. While Americans err in developing practice to the neglect of theory, *Screen* errs in the opposite direction: developing a left theory without substantial relation to left cinematic activity, including teaching, and left political practice. The very idea of a “theoretical practice” is an ingenious, but hardly Marxist, formulation. Marxists of all persuasions have always postulated the interdependence of theory and practice, without confusing the former as the latter.

A similar confusion about theory lies at the base of Juliet Mitchell’s *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (U.S. pub. Random-Vintage), and since in their “Comment,” Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath, and Cohn MacCabe take Mitchell as “more than adequately” dealing with Lesage’s objections to *Screen*’s Freudianism, it’s useful to take a look at Mitchell’s book. In her new work, Mitchell expands on what was a brief chapter in her earlier *Woman’s Estate* (1971). As the title indicates, it deals with Freudian theory as it relates to women: the first section explicating Freud, then going on to critique Wilhelm Reich and R.D. Laing from Mitchell’s position of orthodox Freudianism (i.e., strict, traditional, sanctioned psychoanalytic thought), continuing with a critique of feminist criticisms of Freud, and ending with her own theory of patriarchy, an unsuccessful attempt at a fusion of Freud, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss.

A full discussion of Mitchell's work would have to be quite long. I'm not going to attempt that here. But I think sufficient questions can be raised to demolish the Brewster-Heath-MacCabe assumption that Mitchell's book in any sense adequately deals with Lesage's specific objections. At the beginning of her book, Mitchell executes a very clever maneuver by specifying psychoanalysis, following Jacques Lacan, as the "science of the unconscious." And if we ask what the "unconscious" is, we are told that it is what Freud found it to be. This is circular reasoning: using it one could construct any number of closed system "sciences." Tarot card reading, by this process, can be claimed as a "science": it is what its founding practitioners said it was.

Now Mitchell does this for a good reason. Essentially she wishes to distinguish psychoanalysis from psychiatric therapy and the general field of psychology. It is, according to her, not part of, not allied with, these fields, but it is a completely separate and self-contained "science." Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe accept this intellectual sleight of hand without blinking, blithely ignoring along with Mitchell, the underlying methodological problems. (What, for example, are the standards of evidence for a science? What would be the evidence for psychology as a science? What would be the evidence for a "science of the unconscious"?) But Mitchell's definition is totally inadequate to describe Freud's project. For example, Mitchell uses the "science of the unconscious" argument to separate Freudian theory from clinical practice (although this itself is a heresy within mainstream Freudianism).

Much more seriously, it presents an unusual, nay unrecognizable, version of Freud. Freud is here the theorist of the unconscious, the founder of the science of the unconscious, and nothing more. (Inconsistently, Freud the man is later reintroduced from time to time when it is useful for attacking other positions.) Gone is Freud the founder of modern psychology; gone is Freud the social theorist of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. But Freud is really too large to fit in Mitchell's closet. He was a clinician, and his life's work was clearly directed at therapeutic ends. He was a social theorist with a particular version of history, and his work was also aimed at constructing a general explanation of human psychology and civilization.

Mitchell narrows, by taking out of history, Freud's role in the foundations of psychology. Freud's own definition of psychoanalysis as "the science of the mental unconscious," which Mitchell quotes on p. xii to establish her narrow definition of psychoanalysis, was very clearly stated by Freud at a time when he wished to differentiate psychoanalysis from medicine and from the prevailing psychiatry which found only physical causes for mental disturbance. Indeed, Freud complains, in the very passage Mitchell quotes, that medicine does not study "the higher intellectual functions" (a phrasing which certainly covers more than the

narrowly defined unconscious). In this period, Freud was interested in developing a general psychology, gathering into one field what formerly was split between medicine and philosophy. As he remarked in 1927,

“[Psychoanalysis] is certainly not the whole of psychology, but its substructure and perhaps even its entire foundation.”

Although the topic of her book—psychoanalysis and feminism—to some extent excuses her, as a defense of Freud to an U.S. reader, Mitchell fails by carefully not engaging the heaviest critiques and revisions of Freud. Such critiques have come both from within a therapeutic and/ or theoretical perspective (Adler, Sullivan, Homey, Jung, Gestalt, From, etc.) on the one hand, and empirical research on the other (biological research on mental activity, genetics, psychopharmacology, etc.). There has also been critical work on areas of crucial importance to the Freudian system such as sexual response (Masters and Johnson) and early child development (Piaget and many others). All of this is dismissed by Mitchell for not accepting the unconscious, that is, the strict Freud-as-interpreted-by-Lacan definition of the unconscious. (Of course it has to be dismissed, for such work questions basic postulates of Freudian thought.) Any argument of any kind is basically dismissed for not matching the definitions of the faithful: there is only one True and Revealed Unconscious, and The Holy Sigmund brought it to us mortals.

Mitchell's book is not a dispassionate investigation into the subject of psychoanalysis and feminism. Rather it is a highly partisan defense of Freud in the face of feminist and other critiques of Freud. (It was received in *The Psychoanalytic Review* as a rousing putdown of feminism.) While Mitchell is incisive in pointing out the inadequacies of Wilhelm Reich's and R.D. Laing's alternate psychologies, her critique comes entirely from within the Freudian fortress. Thus she never acknowledges that the motivation of Reich and Laing began with their recognition of fundamental lapses in the Freudian system. For example, she *mentions* one of Laing's principal criticisms—that Freud's psychology takes the single, isolated, reified personality as its object of study and has little interest in social interaction beyond infant personality formation—but she never *deals with or answers* this point. Rather, Laing's overall project is found unsatisfactory, and dismissed totally. This is simply begging the question.

In replying to Lesage, Brewster-Heath-MacCabe do the same thing. Lesage mentioned Laing's crucial objection to Freudian thought. In response, the *Screen* trio takes Mitchell's purism a step further:

“Various kinds of Freudian revisionism (with the exception of Lacan, apparently), the ‘existentialist psychoanalysis’ of Laing, already much more remote from the psychoanalytic tradition, and the ‘sexology’ of Masters and Johnson cannot be synthesized into any coherent position...”

Of course not. This is to set up a straw position and then to knock it down. And while a clever polemical device, it is also a classic avoidance technique, and intellectually a bit shoddy. Mitchell and the Screen Freudians continually fall into this “either-or” pattern. Either Freud is 100% right or he is 100% wrong; same with Laing, who opposes Freud. Laing is found to be less than 100% right; therefore, Freud is 100% right and we need not examine Laing’s critique of Freud. Clearly, it is unsound thinking. It is also, in Freudian terms. oral absolutism and anal compulsive reaction formation. Against such argument one can only direct the unconvinced to the many volumes commenting on Freudian position, beginning with the basic histories of psychology and the standard textbooks. And I can note in passing that in the process of her special pleading, two severe internal problems appear in Mitchell’s revision of Freud. First, she claims that Freud was not prescriptive, but she must claim so in the face of his constantly implied and invoked norms. Second, she concentrates on the Freud of 1890-1920 and never adequately comes to grips. with the later elaboration of the concepts of ego, id, and superego, and libido, and Freud’s view of history.

NOT RECONCILED

“Phallus? Penis? I always called it a wee-wee.” —200
MOTELS

The excursion into Mitchell’s version of Freud has not been for nothing, for Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe also accept psychoanalysis as a system that cannot be refuted, only adjusted from within. But, standing outside the theoretical edifice, one can point out that it is built on shifting sands. So, here is a running commentary on their “Comment” in reply to Lesage.

To begin, the three Freudians seem not to know how to deal with being attacked—and by a woman. This may be a difference in intellectual traditions (British repressed manners vs. U.S. rough house), but it seems as well to reflect their distance from militant feminism. (A distance which in turn brings into question the closeness of their “theoretical practice” to the real world.)

Be that as it may, the writers pretend not to understand what orthodox Freudianism is, or might be (orthodox: sound or correct in doctrine). This is for good reason, for as they admit there is considerable variation internationally among the various sanctioning bodies: most particularly, the French organization expelled Jacques Lacan for revisionism in the 1950s, a purge upheld by the international body. Since our British Freudians favor Lacan, sidestepping the issue here saves them the expenditure of energy required to deal with the question of creeping revisionism. After all, once admitted, revisionism tends to get out of hand. But the fact remains that in following Lacan they are in a Freudian revisionist camp (though doubtless Lacan and his followers

see themselves as the true adherents of the doctrine-part of the pathology of revisionism).

The *Screen* troika goes on to identify a serious problem: if there is a Freudian orthodoxy, one might see the Freudian system as “totally ideological, as furnishing no hold of knowledge.” This needs a little explanation for the uninitiated. (*Screen* writers in general have a magnificent ability to cover their intellectual tracks and assume everyone has read the books they have, and that there is common knowledge of and agreement on terms. This may stem from the elite tradition of British intellectual life: a coterie speaking to itself. In contrast, Americans toss out footnotes with democratic abandon.) Anyway, “ideological” here means “false” and “knowledge” means “truth.” The terms are taken over from Althusser.

The Freudian trio can't quite bring itself to admitting the validity of the feminist critiques Lesage mentions (“may be legitimate ... certain currents of Freudian thought”), but it is “beside the point,” because the only valid critique they will allow is an internal one. The charge of sexism is thus meaningless, for the “science of the unconscious” does not allow for it. Then comes the defense based on Freud’s *intention*. However, Lesage’s argument was clearly made on the basis of Freud’s *result*—that is, what psychoanalysis actually says and does. (And since intent is at least fairly private, and certainly heavily influenced by unconscious factors, how do Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe *know* Freud’s intent? Even within the realm of psychoanalytic postulates this is a pretty weak plea.)

Next, the three commentators throw out a red herring: Lesage’s authorities are found to be “incompatible.” (Somehow this suffices for them not to deal with the knowledge—to use their term—that might be gained from considering anyone but Freud and Lacan.) Therefore, being incompatible, they can't be “synthesized into any coherent position,” though Lesage never said that they could. (The three never do get around to indicating how Freud and Marx can be “synthesized into any coherent position.”) So, we need a

“coherent position from which it would be possible to move from a protest against oppression to the knowledge of that oppression which is also a precondition (but not the only or the first one) of its removal.”

This is curious. It certainly seems on this side of the Atlantic that women know their oppression, and that increasingly they are acting to remove it, for example in struggles against wage discrimination and for child care. Apparently our Freudians haven't considered Mao’s classic statement,

“Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the

skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone.”

But perhaps I just don't understand what they do mean by “knowledge.” I do understand their ability to set up a straw woman rather than deal with Lesage's points. They begin by completely altering Lesage's rejection of “an oppressive orthodox Freudianism that takes the male as the basis for defining the female,” by changing it into “the desire for a social practice that will give as much sanction to the ‘feminine’ as it does to the ‘masculine.’” They claim that this incorrect formulation of Lesage's position “presupposes the natural pre-existence of masculine and feminine subjects.” But Lesage's article neither explicitly nor implicitly argues a “natural pre-existence” but rather biological and social difference. Lesage states,

“we have to recognize entirely different social experiences based on the fact of sex, the fact of the oppression of one sex.” (emphasis added).

Is it perhaps a classic male defense mechanism—not listening to a woman—operating here: attempting to deny biological and social differences, and sexual oppression?

They go on to claim that what Lesage “really rejects” is Freud's bisexuality theory. (What they mean is Lacan's bisexuality theory.) There is, in their universe of discourse, no way of questioning Freud's or Lacan's postulates. The “science of the unconscious” ploy resolves all lingering problems, cuts off all questions, liquidates the opposition. If the work of others suggests major flaws in orthodox Freudian views, this is not the occasion for a re-examination, but rather for a polemical defense. Thus we find Mitchell and the *Screen* Freudians either redefining the Freudian project in an attempt to make irrelevant any objections from others, or holding the fort against all intruders. It smacks of a conversion experience, for none of them apparently can believe that anyone was ever able to offer any criticism of Freud with any measure of validity, or that Freud's insights might be developed and made more sophisticated. In fact, they are perfectly happy redefining objections; it's a marvelous theory that can put words in the mouths of its opponents.

And of course, putting words in one's opponents' mouths means you don't have to listen to what they are saying. Thus, Brewster-Heath-MacCabe essentially deny women's oppression. It's the oppression of “femininity,” according to them. “The mechanisms of socialization, which are inherently oppressive to women,” (Lesage) becomes according to the Freudian trio: “only secondary conditioning.” If it's any consolation, they add they are not “reconciled to an ineradicable inferiority of women.” But they seem pretty content with finding females inferior in the present. “Not reconciled” is not the same thing as

“opposed.” And of course, their very wording illustrates their sexism: the “inferiority” not the “oppression” of women. (Is the working class also “inferior”?) And eradicating the problem? Apparently all women need is a good psychoanalyst.

Well, we've heard it all before. The commentary does go on to something new: their Lacanian exposition of concepts and terms. In the hands of our three commentators, Lacan's sybilline pose and prose becomes tortured phrasing (take any line at random). All of this monkey business is important, they finally get around to saying, because it will explain the “construction of the subject” (the film observer). But how do they *know* it will do this? Again, were supposed to take it on faith, and Lacan's authority.

UNASKED QUESTIONS, UNQUESTIONED ANSWERS

“In a way, this diversity is very exciting, but one has at some point to ask: are these real beginnings, or so many false starts?” —Juliet Mitchell

At the moment *Screen* appears to be in transition from one distinct view to another of what film is (in the sense of what we should be most concerned with in thinking about it). The established and more predominant view regards film and films as relatively autonomous objects of study. The minority view considers film in history, in society, and in terms of the audience. Most frequently both views are found. For example, Stephen Heath's analysis of *TOUCH OF EVIL* (Spring and Summer 15) is both a detailed internal analysis and at two significant points goes “outside” the film to discuss the Mexico-Latin American theme, and the character of Susan as an object of exchange within the male world of the film—both important aspects ignored by other commentators. In addition, Heath's goal, as he states it, is not to arrive at a comprehensive “meaning” for the film, but to use it as a text in which to examine how elements of the film work on the subject, that is, the audience.

There is an uneasiness in *Screen*'s work here. Brewster recognizes that viewers may impose their own readings on a film, and that class is a factor in this. But he also argues that readers “are not free” to invent [their] own reading of the film.”

“A reading which may not be that of the makers imposes itself on the reader, it has a force which cannot simply be denied.” (Spring 75).

This must be questioned. Certainly there are boundaries beyond which a reading of a film cannot go. But is there really “a reading which ... imposes itself on the reader?” There is considerable basis to doubt this assertion. (See, for example, Evan Pattak's article on responses to *THE*

PEDESTRIAN in JUMP CUT 7.) *Screen*'s writers are anti-sociological (unable to recognize a Marxist sociology, apparently) and anti-empirical (unable, apparently, to recognize the Marxist imperative to use and go beyond, not to discard *a priori*, what can be gained from empirical study). The *Screen* group seems determined to find a single reading at the expense of considering ambivalence, ambiguity, irony, and polysemy within the film on the one hand, and neglecting variety within the mass audience and contradictions within the individuals in the audience on the other.

Thus their concentration on the "construction of the subject" takes this "subject" as isolated, individual, having a private experience of the film, and predetermined by the (Freudian) unconscious which in turn is determined by early childhood experience. The subject is essentially out of society and out of history (except the society of the nuclear family and the history of childhood personality development). Using this essentialist subject, in turn universalized, *Screen* falls into the very idealism it decries.

Between the *Screen* concept and Julia Lesage's argument that *Screen* constructs a subject which defines the female in terms of the male, which defines the female as "a lack," which ignores biological and social and political difference, which transforms oppression into "inferiority," there can be no synthesis. *Screen* has constructed a subject defined only by the male, free of class differences and class antagonisms and which has not been and is not affected by the subject's social history and social reality. Ideology then, when it isn't in the singular "reading" of the film, is shoved into a place (the unconscious) and a time (infant personality formation) where only psychoanalysis can find it and bring it to our attention. Politically, this is a formula for quietism.

A POLITICAL BASIS FOR FILM THEORY

"There's a pain deep down inside
It cannot be denied
It can't be satisfied
Let it go, let it go, let it go, let it go."
—"Constipation Blues," Screaming Jay Hawkins

There is a question I have hesitated to ask until this point: are they Marxists? *Screen* and its writers have been remarkably coy about the matter, perhaps for tactical reasons of working within an establishment institution. At best they have used Marxist phrasings, invoking historical materialism, one of the three components of Marxism (Lenin), but not the other two—Marxist economic theory and the doctrine of class struggle. However, they are now being openly attacked as Marxists by Robin Wood. which may force them to take a stand.

In the meantime. *Screen*'s work seems most heavily colored by its

reactive nature: anti-sociology, anti-utilitarian, anti-empiricism, anti-etc., rather than having its own logic of development. *Screen* the publication and *Screen* the loosely affiliated group of critics remain open to a number of serious political criticisms.

ONE. Although their version of psychoanalysis is dressed up in new words, it turns out to be about as simplistic as Hitchcock's version of Freudian ideas in *PSYCHO* and *MARNIE*. One reason for this is that they have essentially leapfrogged their way to Lacan without doing their basic background reading. Most flagrantly, none of them mention Freud's book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which is Freud's clearest and most essential exposition of his ideas applied to verbal and narrative art. Also the *Screen* critics are apparently totally unfamiliar with major theorists on the use of psychoanalysis in art criticism, such as Rudolf Arnheim, Ernst Kris, Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, Simon Lesser, Charles Mauron, and Norman Holland, to name a few, since they don't even mention them to dismiss them. Of course the purism and either-or way of thinking so characteristic of *Screen* articles is much easier to maintain if one claims one little patch of Freudian thought, the Lacanian garden, is Eden before the fall. But for all the fancy terms and redefinitions of older terms, it doesn't take much to see what's under this emperor's new clothes.

TWO. There is a point when tolerance for the necessary complexity, high level of discourse, and apparent separation of theory from mundane concerns which is essential to theoretical development, has to wear out. To be blunt: how much longer do we have to wait until *Screen*'s writing is clear? Beyond its own circle, *Screen*'s unintelligibility is notorious. One example of many: Heath defines a key term in the third paragraph of his *TOUCH OF EVIL* essay:

“Reconstitution is the relation across the instance of the subject between the primary regulation (the construction of the individual subject) and the definition of this construction in specific signifying practices, its reconstruction or replacement, where ‘replacement’ means not merely the repetition of the place of that construction but also, more difficultly, the supplacement—the overplacement: supplementation or, in certain circumstances, supplantation (critical interruption)—of that construction in the place of its repetition, a refiguration of the subject.”

You don't have to be very familiar with psychoanalysis to see that this writing is extremely defensive, constantly setting up barriers between author and reader.

Intelligibility is a difficult editorial problem, one that *JUMP CUT* faces as well. John Hess and I constantly face the dilemma of receiving articles which may be of great importance to a small number of our

readers, but which will be beyond the experience of most of our readers. How does one—editor, writer, filmmaker—decide what audience she or he is addressing and what effect an article or film will have? *Screen* is not oblivious to this problem. MacCabe's exposition of Lacan in the Summer 75 issue followed their introduction of unexplained Lacanian concepts by a full year, but it was a healthy and lucid explanation of Lacan—doubtless the best short introduction in English. Also MacCabe recognizes the unnecessary difficulty of, and inherent elitism of, the *Screen* trend of film writing in his Spring 75 review of a book of essays on Raoul Walsh. But the overall trend in *Screen* remains crabbed writing with crucial concepts used without introductory definition (e.g., Jacques Derrida's concept of 'difference,' the Freudian distinction between unconscious and preconscious). We have to ask, to whom are they speaking? And answer, all too often, only to themselves.

THREE. *Screen* has moved through a series of interests in the 1970s: structuralism, semiology, French concepts of ideology in film, Russian Formalism, Brecht, and now psychoanalysis. I certainly don't think that this is an intended weakness for fads, as is frequently charged. However, in effect because each has been presented with some fanfare as the new key to open all locked doors in film criticism, and each has been presented in a basically ex cathedra way, something is awry. As *Screen* moves along we find the methodology changes, but two things remain disturbingly the same. First, the body of key films remains basically the same old auteurist favorites. Second, *Screen* continually opts for formalism, as seen most clearly in their ability to elevate Brecht's anti-illusionist techniques above his political content, effecting the same separation as bourgeois Brecht critics.

FOUR. In their argument for a Lacanian-Freudian explanation of the person, the *Screen* critics attempt a new kind of biological determinism by claiming personality is decisively established prior to the influence of class and other social factors. Personality is a virtual universal, determined in early childhood. However this theory is in flagrant contradiction with their proclaimed materialism, for, in the case of their postulates about females, they can offer no explanation of how—given their description of women—feminism has developed in individuals, and in a massive movement. Essentially the Lacanian-Freudian model recognizes the realm of current ideology without being able to offer any material basis on which that ideology can be changed. According to this theory, the limited but significant struggle against patriarchal institutions and ideology in Cuba, say, does not and cannot exist. This is anti-empiricism *ad absurdum*.

FIVE. In their enthusiasm for Althusser as a corrective to the obvious mechanistic problems of Vulgar Marxism. the *Screen* group has fallen into a considerable confusion and distortion of Marxism. Althusser, reiterating a Marxist commonplace, speaks of ideology as presenting

imaginary or false relationships as if they were real or true relations. Claire Johnston, in the Summer 75 *Screen*, transforms this into “Althusser’s thesis as to the essentially imaginary nature of ideology,” which is a distortion of Althusser and Marxism. Ideology is not imaginary; it can have the effect of a material force in history. From this kind of misunderstanding (one so flagrant one can only wonder if they have read any Marx or any Marxism besides Althusser), there follows a chain of thought: false = imaginary = imagination (in the Romantic sense) = unconscious (in the Freudian sense). Thereby ideology is deposited in the unconscious ... very strange, and also very non-Marxist. (Althusser, who has written favorably of Lacan, is not an innocent party to this confusion; the uninformed should be aware that Althusser’s version of Marxism is problematic and has come under considerable attack by other Marxists.)

In a similar vein, the *Screen* group seems to accept Althusser’s separation, in a series of his essays, of superstructure from base, of ideology from superstructure, and finally of art from ideology, without a second thought, although it results in a separation of art from base which makes any connection impossible, and which thereby goes far away from orthodox Marxism.

SIX. Essentially *Screen* separates politics from everyday life and in doing so liquidates political struggle. Following the political implications of *Screen*’s line of thought, we find that the task of the revolution and of revolutionaries is not to seize state power and the means of production, but to analyze ideology so we can liberate ourselves from it. The struggle against ideology takes the place of the class struggle, and the vanguard of the struggle: why, intellectuals trained in psychoanalysis! The result is a “theoretical practice” without political practice that results in no practical theory.

SEVEN. I think we have to ask seriously if we have time for much more of this. Let’s face it, it takes several years of an intellectual’s working life to master psychoanalysis, or semiology, or Marxism. Given *Screen*’s unabashed non-humility in proclaiming Lacanian psychoanalysis as the revolutionary all-new-completely-reformulated-for-today’s-toughest-intellectual-problems ANSWER, should we drop whatever else we’re doing and get on this new bandwagon?

Hopefully *Screen* will change and develop. If it doesn’t, it will remain important, but only to a miniscule elite. Patience is running out; skepticism is growing stronger. Unless *Screen* can show some substantial results with this new Lacanian excursion, one can only conclude that we’re better off pursuing the answer to the question of ideology directly by spending our time on Marxism rather than using the indirect route of psychoanalysis.

POSTSCRIPT, POST-MILWAUKEE

I wrote the above before going to a symposium on film theory at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Nov. 18-22, which I'll report on in the next issue.

After talking with Stephen Heath and several other British film people at the conference, I want to qualify some of the above. While I still think the U.S. vs. British generalizations above have merit in indicating the sources and conditions of important differences, the situation is much more complex, of course. *Screen* sees itself and is seen as standing distinctly outside of the university establishment in England.

Additionally, there are many more differences and shadings of opinions among the people associated with *Screen* than I have indicated. These differences have recently emerged in on intense internal debate over the magazine's future editorial direction. Finally, I should add that the real division has emerged in the guise of a national one (which this reply accentuates), but it crosses national lines in reality.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)